IT HAPPENED IN A VILLAGE

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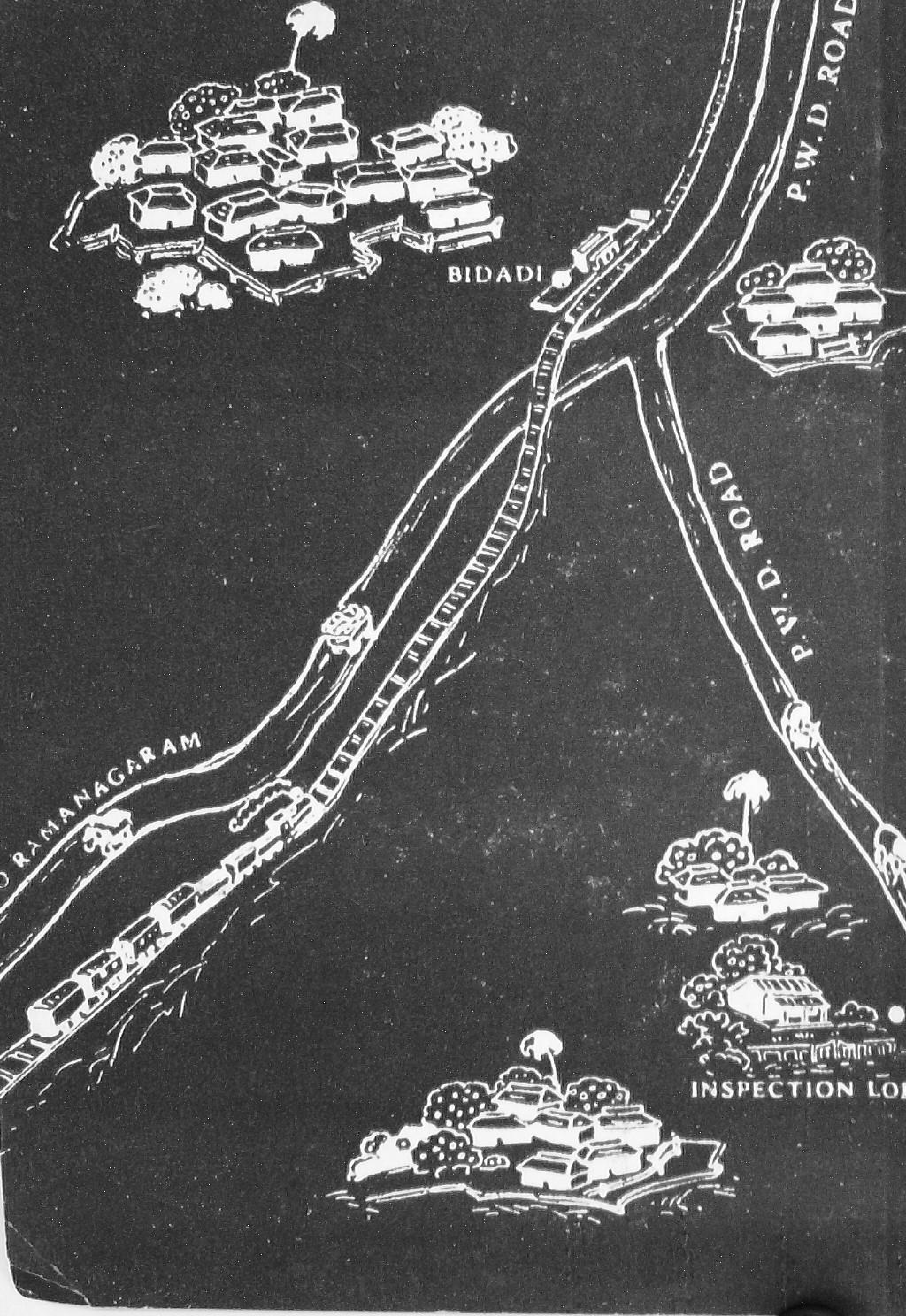
THE PUBLICATIONS DIVISION


BIDADI
P.W.D. ROAD
P.W.D. ROAD
RAMANAGARAM
INSPECTION

DODDAKUNTANAHALLI
VRUSHABHAVATI RIVER
CHIKKAKUNTANA
HALLI
HANCHIPURA
JOGINAPALYA
A. K. COLONY
RESERVOIR
KENCHAPPA'S ROAD
BANNIGIRI
ODGE
MARAVEGOWDANADODDI
BANGALORE

IT HAPPENED IN A VILLAGE

16/3

सत्यमेव जयते

Issued on behalf of
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March 1960 (*Caitra* 1882)

This is a true story. The names of all characters and places are real. The people involved in this narrative re-enacted the incidents to enable the photographs to be taken.

We acknowledge with thanks our debt to the villagers for their co-operation and to the Government of Mysore for their help in the preparation of this book.

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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of Bannigiri. To the people of the neighbouring villages, Bannigiri was a name to be pronounced with condescension and quickly dismissed.

There was something that marked out the people of Bannigiri from others. At the weekly markets in Ramanagaram, which was then called Closepet (after Sir Barry Close, the first British Resident in Mysore State), they were the most ragged. An air of humility, even apology, hung about them as they unloaded their gunny bags and unyoked the bullocks from their carts. From the nervous way they eyed them, it was obvious that the carts were hired. The people of Bannigiri had no carts of their own. Where was the need to keep carts when Bannigiri had no road?

The gently sloping hills, with their ink-blue rocky patches, the clusters of mango and tamarind, the bright red soil and the brick-coloured roofs of amber mud huts, wild lantana creepers blooming pink and lavender, and the startling red of gulmohar, the streaked grey massif of the Savandurga in the smoky distance—all these made the face of the land beautiful. But as far as Bannigiri was concerned, this face was just a mask. The unyielding land drove the more adventurous of the people of Bannigiri to the markets at Ramanagaram. There they shopped for coconuts, cheap handloom dhoties, *chowkies* and gunny bags; then hired carts and moved to another market in the neighbourhood to try and sell at a higher price. If Muniappa, the village diety, was

kind, they would come back with the better part of a rupee in their pockets, return the carts, and trudge the six miles back home again.

But most of the people in Bannigiri stayed there, occasionally going to Bidadi, four miles away, and rarely to Ramanagaram, fourteen miles way. They were content to drive the sterile land with all their strength. From their little hamlet they could see the blue-grey sheets of the Byramangala reservoir stretching out at their feet, good for irrigating more than four thousand acres of paddy land. But only a miracle could pump up its water to their fields.

The average man in Bannigiri had about two acres of dry, rocky land where only *ragi** could grow. If the rains were good, each acre gave him about a hundred and fifty measured seers per year. The question of marketing never arose. A family was lucky if its produce gave all its members enough to eat. But the families of Bannigiri seldom were. The more prosperous or ambitious or desperate of them experimented on a very small scale with cash crops like mulberry. Most of them had some ten sheep and three or four wild hens. But in Bannigiri, even the animals seemed to take on the character of the land. Lambs and eggs seemed to grow fewer and fewer each year.

The women of Bannigiri had never seen electric lighting. The men who returned from Ramanagaram told of the bright lamps that burnt even along the roadside all night without oil or anyone to trim them, of the dazzling shops beyond the hills, and the four-wheeled monsters called lorries that thundered down the main road from Mysore carrying *ragi,* paddy, sand from the

*millet

Arakavati river, sugarcane, jaggery and hay. Many of them did not believe these wild stories. They were sure that as soon as the men left Bannigiri, evil spirits turned their eyes towards sights that were never meant for man to see.

This is the story of such a village. But it is difficult to say whether it is the story of Bannigiri or the story of Kenchappa. But for Kenchappa, the village would have remained as it was when Nagamma fell into the drinking well, or when Narsamma coughed out a basinful of blood one pitch dark night and died before she could be carried to the hospital at Bidadi. There were no tears, for such things had happened before.

Kenchappa's eyes had seen all this and much more, ever since those dismal schooldays in the *cooliematha** where he learnt to write the fascinating rounded shapes of the alphabet in the sand with an awkward forefinger.

Kenchappa remembered well the day when his father had brought vegetables on his way back from Bidadi. He had bragged with the cruel pride of children about the delicious dinner of rice and vegetables which they had been given at home. Many of his schoolmates had never eaten rice. It was just *hittu*†, dipped in spicy *saru*‡, day after day, morning and evening. There was very little paddy land near Bannigiri, and no one grew vegetables. Even the *ragi* crops got worse as time passed. Their seeds were poor, and the sowing methods of their ancestors no longer seemed to yield the same results.

Kenchappa had seen all this, year after year, and as he grew up, a slow anger grew within him. He now was

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* Old type of primary school

† Cooked dough of *ragi* flour

‡ A watery dish of tamarind and *chillies*

no longer a child; he had seen a little of the world. He had known that the paddy-growing villages on the fringe of the great reservoir were beginning to have more money than ever before. Strange men had come there in the last few years from goodness knew where. But they had come to stay, work, and live with the villagers. They could read and write and they had knowledge of many wonderful things. They had taught the people how to double, even treble, their crop. The villagers had asked for wells to draw water up to their fields, and most of the money needed for the masonry and fittings had been given. But the work had to be done by the people themselves. If help was needed for anything, it had come, as though from God. Great things seemed to be afoot all around, but nobody had come to Bannigiri. For Bannigiri had no road.

In twenty years Kenchappa's anger had matured to a great sad load that always pressed upon his chest. One day he decided that Bannigiri must have a road, no matter what happened. News circulates fast in a village that has only forty houses. In Bannigiri, word went round that Kenchappa was mad. "How many lakhs of rupees do you have, great man ?" "Kenchappa commands an army of masons and labourers !" "He thinks he is some kind of Bhagirath !" The people scoffed and jeered. This only made Kenchappa surer that his way was the only way out of the frog's well into the light. The road must be made.

Kenchappa had no lakhs, nor even any army of labourers. But he, whose only claim to formal education was a year in the local *cooliematha,* was able to reach out a furious arm and force the waters of life to flow into his Bannigiri, the little village that not even starvation could make him abandon.

This is the story of how Kenchappa did it, and it starts when the first stirrings of unrest began a process which was to take Kenchappa to the summit of his life's achievement.

THE EARLY YEARS

Kenchappa even as a boy had a mind of his own. "Obstinate as a mule!" Chikkananjaiya had said of him when, at the age of eight, he had set his heart on a white shirt and refused to go to the village school without it. But Chikkananjaiyas' friend Doddiah has intervened. "Don't worry so," he had told Chikkananjaiya : "I have great hopes of Kenchappa. Give him his white shirt. You will not regret it, I know. And who knows which of you is right ?"

Eight days later, Kencha was straggling along to school with his teacher and his shabby black umbrella. The stiff, unwashed mill cloth of his new white shirt crackled as he ran downhill against the wind.

The obstinate boy grew up into a determined lad. Even the bullocks rested each Monday, the sacred day of Shiva, for each bull was dear to him who rode Nandi, the most magnificent of all bulls. But Kenchappa rested on no day. On Mondays he worked in the fields with his hands, weeding, ploughing, harvesting, doing whatever the seasons dictated. On other days he set out for Byramangala or Bidadi to buy casuarina wood. This he took by cart to sell as fuel in Bangalore, the big city of a thousand lights. Money went cheap there,

for they said a war was going on, and he managed to get good prices for the fuel.

In four years the little earthen pot he kept in the grain jar was full of notes and coins.

Then came the day when Kenchappa placed the money pot in front of his father when he returned from the fields. "What's this, what's this," Chikkananjaiya mumbled. Then, when he saw what it was, he looked away and went on eating in silence. Many hours later, Chikkananjaiya called out shyly, "I say, Kencha, I was just thinking about that business of the white shirt. . . ."

Kenchappa pretended not to remember, and went quickly out of the house towards the fields.

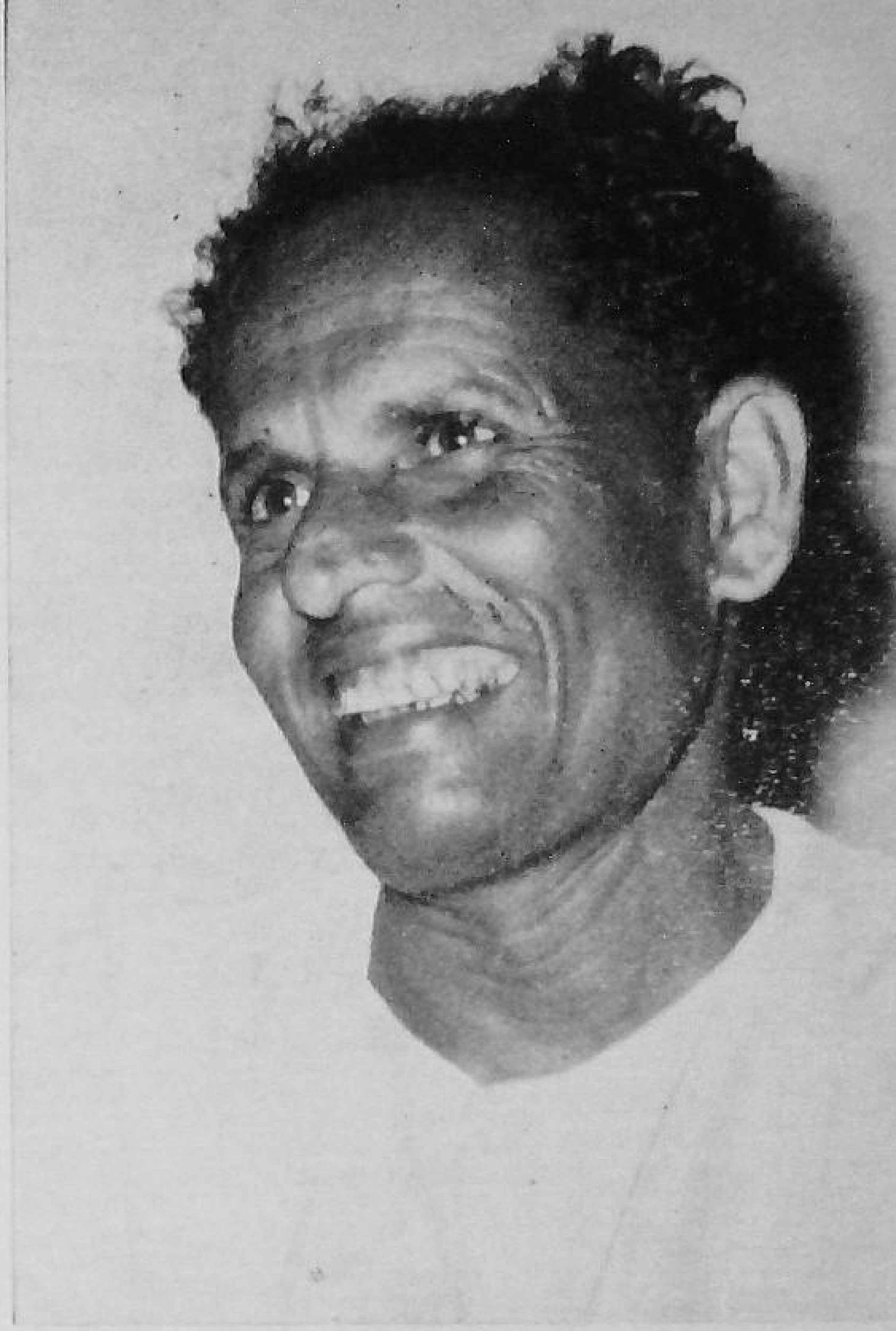
Soon Chikkananjaiya added four more acres to his lands. Kenchappa, a wise old man of eighteen years, began to feel like a giant. There was nothing he could not do.

Then, without warning came the bad years. There was no rain. Acre after acre of *ragi* seedlings shrivelled up and died. The drinking wells ran dry. One could hear the water buckets clanging desolately against the stone as optimistic housewives tried to get a few drops of water. Kenchappa heard his father talk in grave tones in the *jagali** with one or two people of his own age group. The wrath of Muniappa, the deity they honoured each year at *Yugadi*†, and honoured each day, was upon them. There was no fodder. They had to let the first of their cows go, and a few days later, the second too.

One day, striding through the ravaged and dusty fields came the Big Man from Byramangala, with his

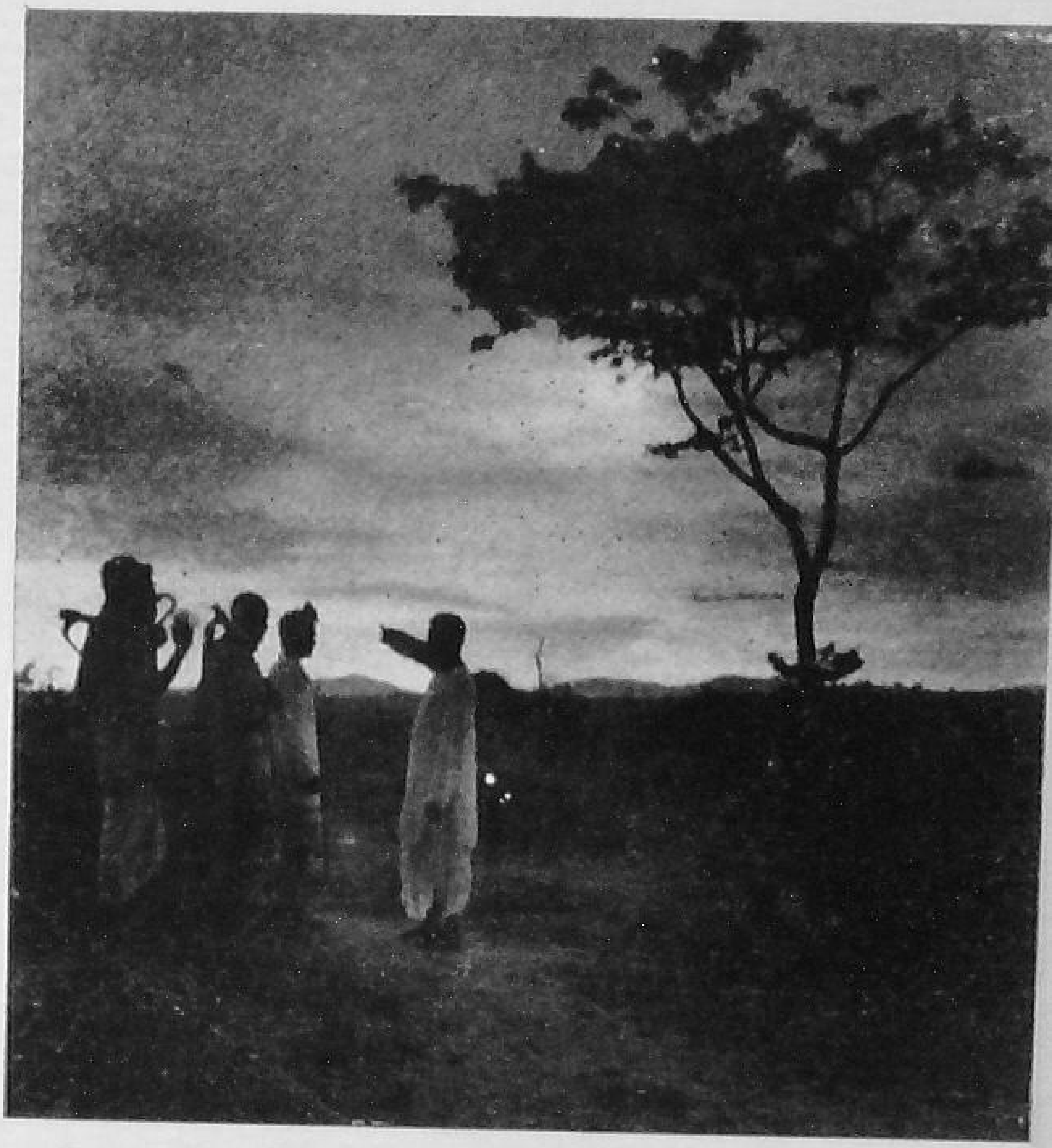
* Raised platform in front of larger houses

† The first of Chaitra, celebrated as New Year's Day in Mysore



Kenchappa and his house in Bannigiri

"That is the main road, five miles as the crow flies; but we have no way of getting there but to walk", Kenchappa tells them



Work at the hardest stretch between Bannigiri and Joginapalya

Kenchappa supervises the road-building operations

retinue of ryots, one carrying his umbrella and the other his drinking water in a jug. He had fine leather chappals, a spotless white *uttariya**, and glowing plump cheeks. Veersanje Gauda had been the Patel of Bannigiri ever since Kenchappa could remember. Wherever he walked, the people crowded round, keeping always a pace behind, gazing in awe, expectant.

An old woman shuffled up to him with an empty water pot. "You must save us," she whimpered. "Muniappa's fury is upon us." There was a rumble of assent from the crowd. Veersanje Gauda held up the palms of his hands towards the hungry crowd. "Courage", he said, patting and soothing the silent air with his hands. "You shall have all you want."

One of the ryots handed him a chequered towel and he wiped away the beads of sweat from his face. Another brought his water jug. The Patel bent forward, cupped his hands, and drank as the ryot poured out from the jug. With another handful, he dabbed his hot face, made as if to rinse his hands and passed his wet palms over his arms. He had walked all the way from Byramangala.

The Patel suddenly felt something piercing through his back. He wheeled quickly around, and saw a young man gazing levelly at him with bright black eyes. In these eyes there was no fear. Veersanje Gauda nudged the man who held his umbrella. "Who is that ?" he asked slowly.

"Oh, that is Chikkananjaiya's boy, Kenchappa."

All through the next day, while the people of Bannigiri built a new shrine for Muniappa, and prepared for the

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* Upper cloth

sacrifice, the Patel was aware of Kenchappa's eyes upon him. A stretch of ground was cordoned off with a piece of string. The fattest chicken that remained in Bannigiri was brought and offered, and somebody went into a trance. All the people still babbled excitedly and hovered round the Patel. All but Kenchappa, whose mind seemed far away. He imagined large pots of water coming by cart to Byramangala from the big tank. He imagined donkeys loaded with gunny bags bringing rice, *ragi* and fodder from the wet lands across the main road. But none of this for Bannigiri, for Bannigiri had no road. Had there been a road, Jeergunti's uncle need not have died. His brother Kariappa's children need not have sobbed all day and all night, beating their thin legs against the ground. Kenchappa's reverie was halted with a jerk. The man who had gone into a trance was now rolling on his stomach, going into various contortions, and uttering unearthly cries. "The god speaks, the god speaks," some woman cried out. The people gazed open-mouthed, first at one, then at the other. "Above all," thought Kenchappa wearily, "there need not have been this waste and this fooling of the ignorant." A road could have brought water to Bannigiri from the tank, and food too.

THE PATEL'S DISCOVERY

The sacrificial worship was followed by the customary feast. Old people came hobbling with their *thalis.** The children too came with slow steps and sunken eyes as though they had aged overnight. The women came last of all, in small groups, casting uncertain glances at their men, who stood patiently. Donkeys had come loaded with gunny bags, and men carrying sacks slung over long poles, two by two. The Patel had supervised the feast. A large fire crackled. There was the clang of cooking pots and soon the grove was filled with the aroma of *saru* and *hittu,* an aroma which the people of Bannigiri had almost forgotten. An hour later, two hundred people sat in straggly rows under the old banyan that spread over nearly two acres. Kenchappa helped serve them. He returned again and again to the children and the old people with a huge basket of *ragi* cakes, until they waved him away with a blessing or a smile. There was even water for all to drink. Not a drop spilled over. A group of people came forward with outstretched dhoties and towels to carry food back for those who were too ill or too weak to walk.

Kenchappa lingered in the banyan grove long after the last eaters had gone away. He helped to pile up the empty baskets and gunny bags in neat stacks. He offered to carry them back to Byramangala. Veersanje

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* Metal plates

Gauda accepted with alacrity and Kenchappa joined the strangers' caravan.

Night was falling as they entered the Patel's big house. A mat was spread for Kenchappa and a lantern lit. He sat in the narrow verandah that ran all the way round the shallow pool in the open courtyard. It had begun to rain. This was the sort of welcome coincidence that ironically enough, strengthened the hands of those who believed in trances and sacrifice. Kenchappa watched the rain splash on the blackened tiles overhead and drip into the pool. Through light sprays of water he saw Veersanje Gauda on the other side of the house, gesticulating and giving orders. Then he came and rejoined Kenchappa. The lady of the house unlocked the creaky door of the grain room at the corner by lamplight. Kenchappa saw for a brief moment that it was full of massive jars covered over with sack and matting. He noticed the heavy lock and marvelled in silence. Dinner was served in shining, steaming metal plates. It was still *ragi,* but *ragi* enriched with large spoonfuls of *ghee.* There were vegetables in the *saru,* with curds and pickles to follow. Veerasanje Gauda ate heartily, urging Kenchappa to take more. But Kenchappa's appetite had suddenly vanished.

"There is going to be no crop this year," the Patel remarked.

"No, not in Bannigiri," Kenchappa said quietly in agreement.

"What are your plans for the future, Kenchappa ?"

"I haven't thought about it much," Kenchappa said.

"Did you see the big tank down by the main road, when we were coming from Bannigiri ? The tank from

where this water comes," the Patel said getting up and rinsing his mouth, sending a spout of water flying into the courtyard.

"Yes, I know of the tank. I have heard that the Government has plans to build a dam and make it pukka, so that it need never dry up."

"That is right. I have undertaken a contracting job there. I need a bright young fellow to help me. Would you be interested in working for me ?"

"What about your own sons ?" Kenchappa asked.

"Oh, my children have all gone to Bangalore. My sons are studying. One is at the engineering college. The other is going to be a doctor. My daughter is married. . . ."

The Patel sailed off into another world with his reveries. It gave Kenchappa time to absorb what he had said.

"What would I have to do ?"

"To begin with, it would be a *maistri's* job," the Patel said. Kenchappa thought dismally of two of his Bannigiri playmates who had gone off to Mandya to do the work of oxen. This offer was much better. Ten rupees a month was not a sum to be sneezed at.

"Yes, I'll do it," Kenchappa said, rising. "I'd better start back now. It's a long way".

Declining the Patel's offer of a night's rest in his house, Kenchappa started out in the night. Five miles of rugged country, prickly grass, treacherous pits, not even a pathway ! Why could they not have a road ! They had bullocks and they could have easily bought a cart. Kenchappa was no longer a child but he found himself playing at make-believe. All the way home he

imagined he was riding a magnificent carriage, drawn by a sturdy pair of bullocks. There was a beautiful winding road with shady trees on either side. As he waded through the knee-deep slush of the Byramangala backwater on the way, he pretended he was riding over a broad, arched bridge with culverts on either side.

Chikkananjaiya's rheumy old eyes lit up for a moment when he heard of the Patel's offer. But only for a moment.

"You'll go away, son", he said flatly.

"No, Appa, it is only two miles away." I am not going away to the ends of the earth", he added. But he felt that that was exactly where he was going.

THE TASTE OF LEADERSHIP

Old Chikkananjaiya could not contain the news, and he shared it with one or two of his confidants.

The lad was barely eighteen, and he was to get ten rupees every month regularly ! If only his mother had been alive to see this !

It was time the young man was found a bride. This became Chikkananjaiya's constant anxiety. One of his cronies who had been to Harohalli to buy a pair of bullocks said he had seen a girl, Veerappa's daughter Devirammanni, who would be an ideal match for Kenchappa. It was a good family. Veerappa had ten acres of land, two acres of which were wet. The girl

was healthy and good to look upon. She was nearly fifteen already and her father was anxious to marry her off.

In two months, Kenchappa's life was quite changed. Now it was the smoke that woke him up. There was still an hour to cock crow. Devirammanni crouched over the wood fire blowing into it. By the time Kenchappa finished washing and came back into the house, a meal was spread before him. Devirammanni sat on a mat and, curled about the wooden pole that held up their roof, watched him eat. Her glossy black hair was combed smoothly back and knotted. A mess of faded flowers still clung to it. She sat with eyes downcast.

When he got up to go, she moved lithely away and returned with a packet of food which she stretched shyly towards him. Kenchappa smiled and went out quickly. Devirammanni watched from the doorway. As he disappeared round the bend, the cock crew.

When he got to the work site, the labourers were astir about their low shacks of matting, sack, earth and twigs. He did not know most of the faces. Some had come from as far away as Kagallipura. By the time the Patel arrived, Kenchappa had got them started. A truck-load of sand from the Arakavati river stood three furlongs from the western bund. The labourers had formed themselves into a sort of conveyor belt. Tin trays full of sand were tossed down the line and the empty ones up the line back to the truck. Kenchappa bustled about, full of energy, smiling, thrusting his elbows forward, and uttering encouraging cries.

"The lime has not arrived still!" the Patel called to Kencha. "How in Shiva's name can the mortar work be finished before the rains come, I ask you!"

This is how Kenchappa was trained in the school of life, all through those long months, all through those years. Slowly the Patel's tone when he spoke to him changed. Kenchappa could not tell how or when he stopped being a young apprentice of no consequence and became an equal, in all but age.

The Patel often saw Kenchappa covered with a fine white dust, shouting instructions above the creaking of the giant grinding stone. He knew all the workers by name : Basava, Venka, Siddamma, Chikki, and a hundred others. There was nothing they would not do for him. They would double their speed if he urged, for he was one of them. The Patel realised that Kenchappa had become the key without which the western bund would not be completed.

A LAPFUL OF WISDOM

Four years later, the Patel set up a flour mill for the labourers at the work site. It was never clearly stated that Kenchappa would be the manager. It was simply taken for granted. Soon the mill became a busy little nucleus where women gathered to gossip in groups while their baskets, smeared with dung and earth, waited in a queue. Cries of "five seers", "ten seers", announced to the owners whose turn it was. They carried the flour back to their shacks at three pice a seer. Nothing was cheap any more.

It was already eleven years since Kenchappa had

The ladies of Bannigiri also do their bit

Devirammanni gets ready to cook a midnight meal for a hundred road builders

Building the road was not such a difficult thing after all

The youngest villagers lend a hand in building the road

Kenchappa helps move a heavy rock out of the way

started working. But he still carried a ten-rupee note home to Devirammanni on the fifth day of each month.

Now Kenchappa often felt the Patel's hand on his shoulder. He always had a kind word for him. The Patel was old enough to be his father. He often said so, with moist eyes.

Then came the day when Veersanje Gauda called him son, and told him he would make him rich. He was going into the sugarcane business. Dasa and Boganna from Byramangala were the other two partners. All the necessary permits had been arranged. If Kenchappa could get hold of only seven thousand rupees in two years his lap would be filled with silver.

"The Patel is a wise man. He knows what he is doing", said old Chikkananjaiya.

"We will manage it", said Kariappa.

That is how the new house they had built in Jogina-palya and the eight acres around it that Kencha's maternal grandfather had left them went from them. And Chikkananjaiya who had thought of nothing but tilling the earth all these seventy years became a partner in business towards the end of his life.

"Kencha has always wanted better things for us," he told Doddiah when he came full of concern to talk of this business deal he had heard about, even as far Maravegowdanadoddi.

But it so happened that Kencha's lap was not filled with silver. One day, a very agitated Veersanje Gauda took Kenchappa to his house. He mopped his brow and said he was ruined. He thrust papers at him, and filled his ears with strange words. He spoke of the vagaries of the market. He paced up and down with

wrinkled brow, saying something about mortgage and demand pronotes. At last Kenchappa understood. There had been a great loss in the sugarcane business. He was a partner. He must produce two and a half thousand rupees as his share in the loss.

Kenchappa got up and left without a word. He reached Bannigiri quicker than he had ever done before. Within a week, four of Chikkananjaiya's new cows were sold for a thousand rupees. There was nothing else to sell except the land. He resolved he would not sell any more land. It was the only thing that stood by one. It took him another three weeks to borrow the remaining fifteen hundred. No one person he knew had so much. He had to mortgage his land and borrow from four people on a demand pronote.

Kenchappa stirred out of Bannigiri only when he had two thousand five hundred rupees tucked safely in his *dhoti*. The uncertainty of big deals that he did not understand and the humiliation gnawed at him. It was no better to be the *maistri* of a small-time contractor at ten rupees a month! "Never, never again!" he vowed.

When Veersanje Gauda saw Kenchappa approaching erect and unsmiling, he stood up and hailed him without hope. Kencha greeted him with a few words and placed the money before him. The Patel reeled. He had never expected to see the money. He felt himself in the grip of a kind of power he had not known before.

"You are the salt of the earth", he said, overcome with feeling. "You are a real jewel". His eyes filled with tears. "It is such as you who deserve to be Patel, not I. My days are done".

EIGHT MILES TO PROSPERITY

It was not much, the hundred and twenty rupees Kenchappa would get each year as Patel for revenue collection work. And he was hardly the man to bask in self-importance. Yet he felt elated, as though a new life had opened out to him. He knew the minds of his people. He would now use this knowledge to lift Bannigiri out of its stagnation.

It is true that Kenchappa bought himself a pair of good shoes and an umbrella, but this was because he foresaw an endless walking programme ahead of him. Chikkamma, who was now nearly twelve, and Shivanna who was just nine, teased their father about his new shoes. Kenchappa laughed with them, but silently he vowed that they would not walk as his generation had had to.

The one thing that was constantly in Kenchappa's mind was the need for a road connecting Bannigiri with the main road. Now this became almost an obsession. He had mentioned his wish to Veersanje Gauda earlier. "Forget all about it", he had said. "I have been writing letters asking the Government for a road for the last twenty years. Nothing ever came of it, except more letters. No official has even seen Bannigiri. I hear that the Government has started helping a lot of villages. Some sort of plan or other they call it, but Bannigiri is not on their programme at all".

"I will change all that," thought Kenchappa.

Veersanje Gauda had left Byramangala and gone to settle down in Bangalore, but from him Kenchappa inherited ready made camps of friends and enemies. What he valued most of all was his succession to Jeergunti, the (Patel's) *thoti.** Jeergunti was an odd character in many ways. He had always lived in Bannigiri, but nobody remembered how long ago he had been born. It never occurred to anyone that he might have a family. If he had a wife and children he never spoke of them. He was always at Kenchappa's side, like a shadow. He had soft brown eyes, like a faithful bullock's. He was the one man to whom it did not matter whether Bannigiri had a road or not, for he himself was as nimble as a mountain goat. He could climb the most rugged country and descend the most slippery depths. Eighteen or twenty miles a day of brisk walking was nothing for him. The people of all the villages around Bannigiri often saw his figure striding purposefully along, not looking this way or that, sometimes carrying medicines, sometimes letters, sometimes just his staff of black wood. They thought of him as a sort of mobile post office. He was everywhere. Kenchappa could not help thinking that Jeergunti was the personification of the road that did not exist.

Early one morning, the two set out on a preliminary survey. They had never heard of survey instruments, but both knew each inch of the country as well as the palms of their hands. Kenchappa was miserly with words. He thought that if he spoke too much, the jealous fates would rob him of his great idea. But the *thoti* was not in the least curious; simply anxious to do whatever Kenchappa wanted him to. Kenchappa thought

*A sort of peon

fight noisily over some old bits of tile. A young mother desperately tried to rock a squalling infant back to peace. The two hundred odd people of Bannigiri settled down to a sociable evening. At least six separate units of conversationalists could be seen.

When Kenchappa rose to speak, folded his hands and bowed his head in deference, nobody noticed. When he said, "Respected elders and brothers, I wish to put before you something that is of the greatest importance to us", the babble of voices continued as before. The fight between the boys had reached a climax and there was an ear-splitting scream before they started to chase each other in circles round the assemblage. Kenchappa cleared his throat and began again. The infant had been lulled to sleep and the people nearest to him stopped talking, but there was still too much hubbub for him to go on. Old Doddiah who had come from Maravegowdanadoddi for the occasion now stood up in a fury. "You, over there! Can't you keep your mouths shut for a little while?" This was the voice of authority, the voice of age.

"Each of you is wiser and better than I", Kenchappa continued, "and I do not presume to tell you anything that you all do not already know. We have managed without a road all these years, but I do not see why we should go on like this. I feel that Bannigiri must have a proper connection with Byramangala and the main highway between Bangalore and Mysore. I appeal to you all to come forward and help in this project...."

The carefully prepared speech went on in this strain. Kenchappa was anxious not to get anyone's back up. They were bound to have enough of difficulties without that sort of thing.

THE PULSE OF BANNIGIRI

The next evening, after all the men had returned from the fields and eaten, Jeergunti went from house to house announcing that the new Patel wished them to gather under the *peepul* tree.

"There is no festival for another week yet. Is there a marriage in the Patel's house ?"

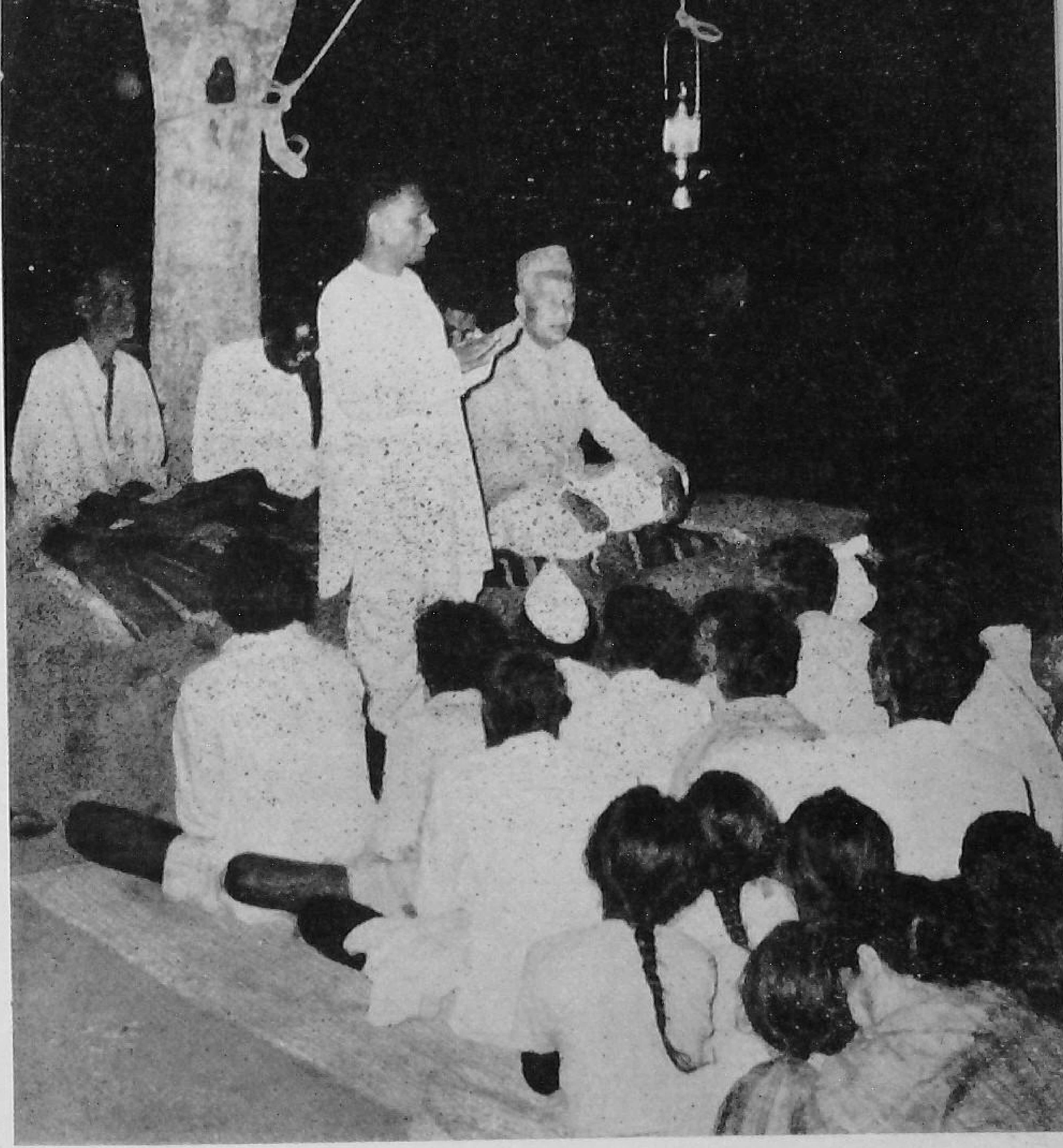
The simple-minded Jeergunti did not realise that they were being sarcastic. "No, it is of the road he wishes to speak", he explained and passed on to the next house.

"Look at this Kenchappa", a voice said. "Until yesterday he was just an urchin who spent most of his time atop the *honge*. Now that he has become Patel, his head is already bursting with notions. We have heard about this road before !"

"Does this upstart think he can do what Veersanje Gauda with all his influence and wisdom could not do in twenty years ?" another voice mocked.

Such was the murmur that went round before the meeting. But all the forty houses of Bannigiri did come. Some came to scoff and jeer, some to be entertained, some because everybody else was going, but most of them came because they were curious.

Kenchappa sat a little apart, trying not to look too anxious. The crowd slowly became thicker. Many people returning late from the fields gravitated towards the tree and slumped down, leaning on their ploughs, without bothering to go home first. Two boys began to



Kenchappa addresses the people of the village of Maravegowdanadoddi with the help of the former Patel and old Doddiah

Kenchappa spoke of emergencies in sickness and famine, of unnecessary delays, of tiresome headloads that could be done away with, and of the new knowledge, the new tools and the Government help that would bypass Bannigiri if they had no road.

Someone in the back rows became impatient. "Hasn't Bannigiri managed all right for hundreds of years without your help ? What is the great emergency now ?"

"Please do not interrupt. Let us at least hear what he has to say."

"Who in Shiva's name are you to talk to me like that !"

There was an outburst of noise again and Kenchappa had not even started saying what he had really come to say. With great effort Doddiah managed to get the assembly in order again.

Kenchappa explained to them how the road would run, how long it would be, and how many villages would benefit from it.

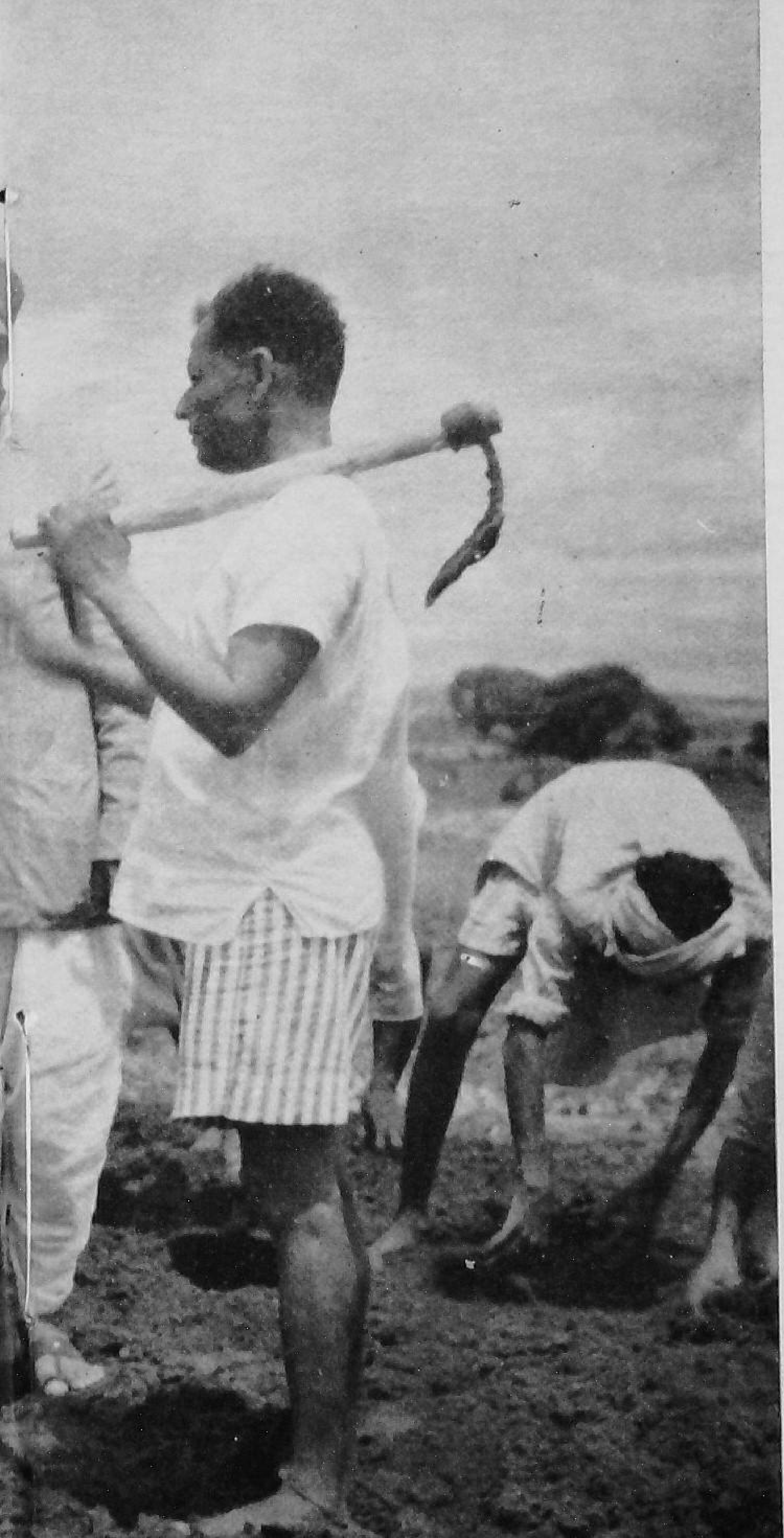
"But you haven't told us the most important thing. How much will it cost ?" rang out a voice.

"That is just what I have been wanting to tell you. It will cost nothing."

"Nothing ?" Another voice took up the argument. "Do you have an army of labourers at your command ?"

"No. We will build the road ourselves."

"As though we have not enough to do to stay alive !" The first voice was back again. More dogged now, and openly hostile. "This man here wants us to let our crops go to rack and ruin, and let our children starve so that we can chase some wild notion of his about a damn fool road !"



The Patel tries to persuade Kempamna of Maravegowdanadoddi to give up a bit of her land for the road

"It is not such an impossible thing. Each family can take up a certain allotted amount of work and finish it at their leisure. It will not be necessary to neglect your fields. If you make up your minds, you can surely find just a little time everyday for a road that will bring the whole district to your door."

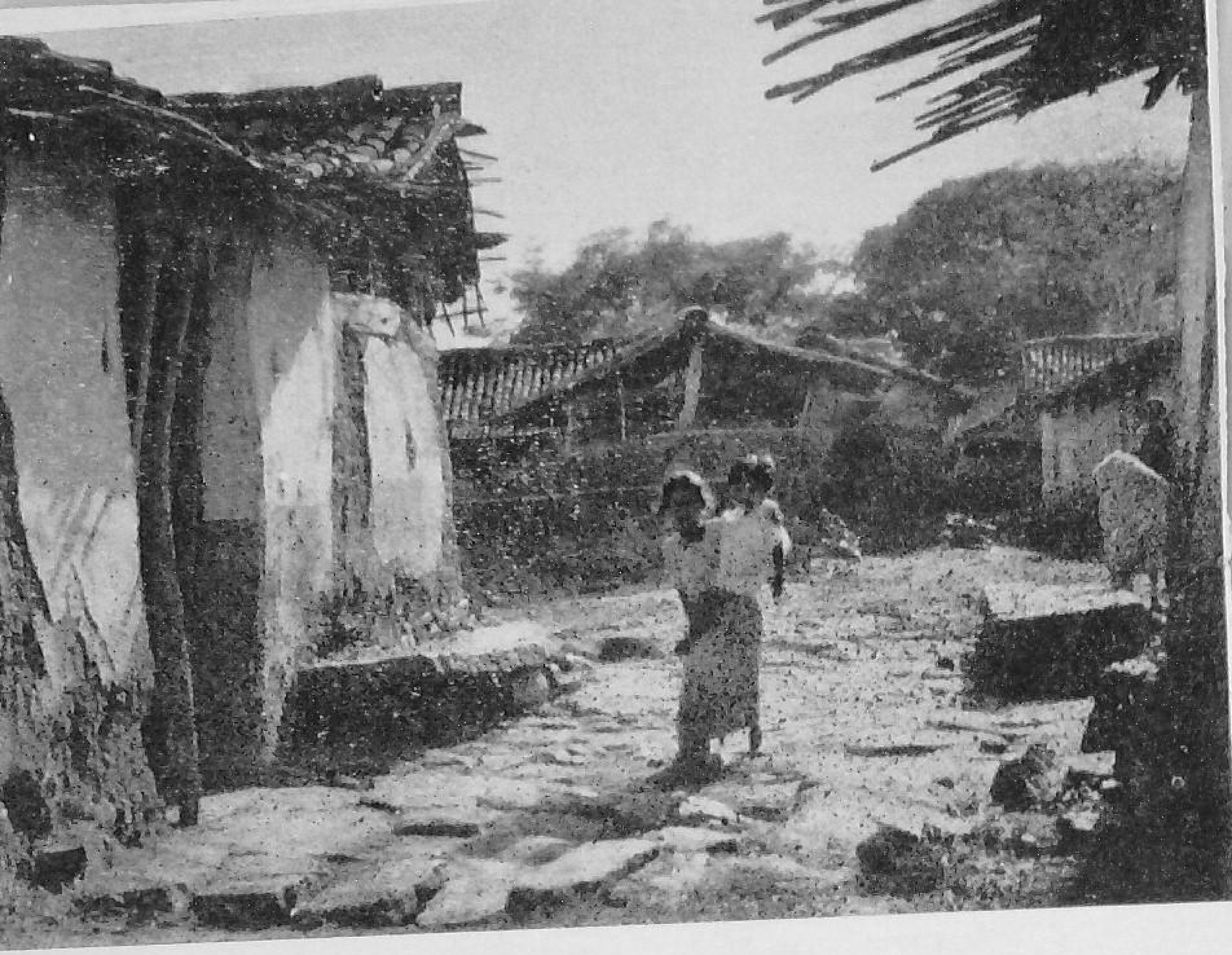
"That is what *he* says", one old woman mumbled to another shaking her head, a gnarled forefinger curving over her chin.

"How do we know what he says is true ?" the other one asked, turning to Doddiah.

"You don't know. You have just to take it on faith" cut in Kenchappa pleadingly. He was desperate. "You, Devamma, didn't your daughter die in childbirth last year ? Would it have happened if there were a road for a doctor to come from Kaggallipura or Bidadi ?"

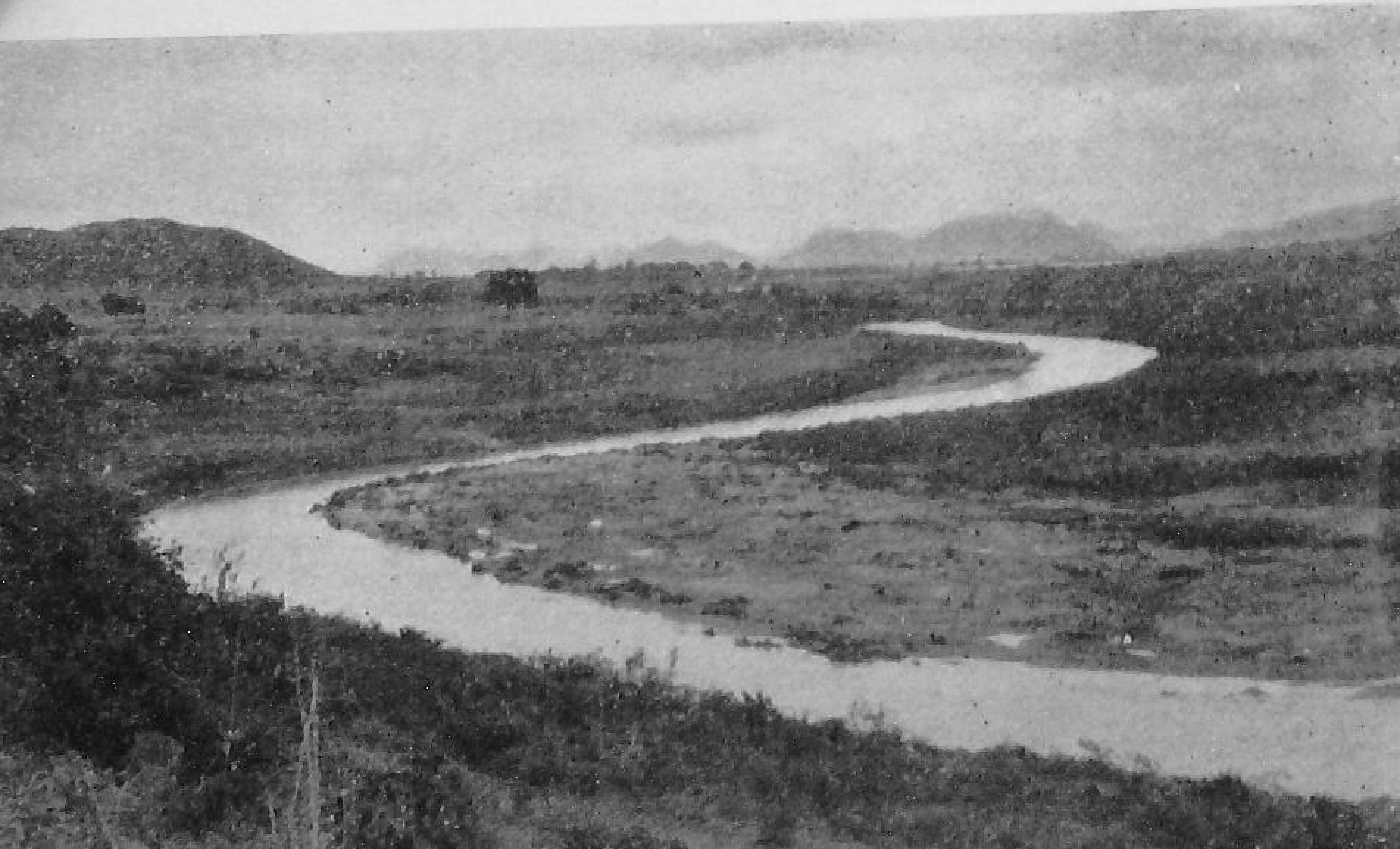
"It was God's will", sighed old Devamma, retiring from the field.

And this was his own village ! He still had to tackle the other four where he was almost a stranger. He had not yet said anything about the land they would have to give away for the road, the tax they would still be called upon to pay on that land, the crop they would have to sacrifice, the trees they would have to plant afterwards. When he had prepared his speech all this had seemed so little to ask for in return for the road. Now he decided to say no more. All he would ask them to give now was work. He knew the people of Bannigiri. They were a hard-working lot. Their resistance now was not to work but to something else. Somehow or the other he had to deflect their minds away from the ruts of thinking they were used to.



The main street in Hanchipura hamlet

Vrushabhavati river seen from Chikkakuntanahalli



some of his lands had become wet in the bargain. When word went round that the Government would give them compensation for their lost land, the people calmed down somewhat. However, when the compensation did come, after months of petitioning and suspense, it was only forty rupees per acre. The land had easily been worth a hundred, for it was good wet land, and the villages had been connected by road to Byramangala and Bidadi.

These were the people who bought lands in Maravegowdanadoddi and settled down to a much more humble existence than they had been used to. The break with the lands of their forefathers had no chance of being forgotten, for each evening the people of Maravegowdanadoddi had to see the sun glow red over the still waters below to the west where they had once lived.

Rajamma was the great lady of Maravegowdanadoddi. Her husband Venkatappa had more land than any one else there, nearly twenty-five acres. She had bangles from Bangalore and it was said that one of the stones in her nose-ring was a diamond. Late one evening, as Rajamma waited for her husband to return from the fields, she saw two lanterns approach their house.

"We want a word with Venkatappa", came a voice from the half darkness.

"He is out", she said retreating into the house.

"We will wait", said the voice, unwavering. The two figures sat down on a mat on the *jagali*. As the lantern on the floor lit up the strangers' faces, Rajamma saw that one of them was Kenchappa. She had seen him walk past many times when the big reservoir was being built.

At last Venkatappa came. After the Bannigiri experience, Kenchappa had chosen night time for transacting

Kenchappa stood firm and haggled for three hours. He reasoned with each dissident voice, bursting with impatience but never letting it show. The voice of the hostile elder who had jeered at his plans at the beginning of the meeting gradually lost its edge. "Perhaps there is something in what he says !" the elder conceded at last. That marked a gain for Kenchappa just when he was on the point of giving up. After that the people of Bannigiri came over to him.

"The rains come in four months," Kenchappa put in, seizing a moment when he felt stronger than all the others. "We must prepare to start work as soon as the ground is softened by the first showers. Then we must work like men possessed. We have only four months of rain in which to complete the work. And complete it we must if we are to preserve it. A half-finished *kuccha* road is no different from a ploughed field."

His case had begun to seem so hopeless to Kenchappa when the meeting was half way through that when he came home at last to his first meal that day, it was with the feeling that he had had too easy a victory.

BEYOND BANNIGIRI

It was many years ago that the Byramangala reservoir had swallowed up nearly seven hundred acres of good paddy land. Two villages disappeared under the waters. At the time the people cursed and swore at the old Patel, because quite mistakenly they associated the construction of the reservoir with him, and also partly because

"Jeergunti, go and fetch all the villagers. Say that Venkatappa wishes them to gather here to talk of something important."

The *thoti* was off at a trot and in a little while all the twenty-five houses of Maravegowdanadoddi had gathered around the lanterns outside Venkatappa's house.

Kenchappa almost repeated his Bannigiri speech, but this time his hands and feet did not turn cold. He felt that the battle was half-won already. He noticed that there was an old woman who sat absolutely still and silent, while the others made remarks and nodded their heads. When Kenchappa announced the land donations of Doddiah and Venkatappa, the old woman made a contemptuous sound and spat on the ground.

"What is the matter, Kempamma ? What is on your mind," Venkatappa asked.

Her old eyes were suddenly alive with fire as she stood up.

"You will get nothing from me ! Nothing whatever !" she hissed under her breath, and stalked away. There was an uneasy silence and the people began to whisper amongst themselves.

Kenchappa said no more and went away, the faithful Jeergunti close at his heels with the lantern. Again he imagined he was riding a carriage from the Village Panchayat road to Maravegowdanadoddi then on to Bannigiri, then to the Adi Karnataka Colony a mile to a north, then Hanchipura and Chikkakuntanahalli. If only it could be a reality !

The next day Kenchappa and Jeergunti walked up to the Adi Karnataka Colony. They could not have chosen a worse time. It was the last feasting day of the

serious business, for there would be no distractions. In a few moments, Kenchappa explained his entire scheme.

Venkatappa was an amiable character. "Oh yes, it is a good idea to have a road. Of course, there is nothing strange about it for us. We have been accustomed to these things. Certainly, we will work. But what about the land for the road? Who will give the land?"

Kenchappa shifted his weight to the other leg and said after a slight pause, "We will have to ask the people who own the lands through which the road will pass to donate them for the common good. There is no other practical way of doing it."

Venkatappa thought for a moment and asked what direction the road would take, and whose lands it would pass through.

"We need two acres from you, and three-fourths of an acre from Kempamma and half an acre from Doddiah," Kenchappa replied at once.

There was silence.

"Doddiah has already agreed to give the land. So have most of the people in Bannigiri," Kenchappa added softly.

Still no answer in the dark.

"Once we have a road, this village is likely to become as prosperous as the one you have left behind. What you give away will all come back to you one day in some other form. And two acres is really not so much for you to give, Venkatappa. You are a big man and unless you agree, the rest of the village will not either."

Venkatappa thought this over for a while. Then he said "Very well, it will be as you wish."

Kenchappa felt an upsurge of excitement.

gave out flat, tremulous notes. The instrument was the treasure of the village. Vardayya was strutting with his chest thrown out and the fine muscles of his arms flexed, singing loudly in a raucous voice. At this moment roads, speeches and labour had no place in his world.

Kenchappa went home and came back the next morning. Tired after the feasting, the people listened passively to all he had to say. But it made no sense to them. "We have nothing to do with all this. Why bother us ?" they said. And all the eloquence and persuasion Kenchappa tried after that fell on deaf ears.

"Enough of campaigning !" Kenchappa thought.

"I want the road, a little bit of it, a little stretch at least which I can touch with my hands. All the other tangles we will solve when we came up against them. What do you say, Jeergunti ?"

"Whatever you say, sir," the *thoti* answered, grinning broadly.

THE BEGINNING OF THE ROAD

Bannigiri was astir. Before sunrise, Kenchappa and Jeergunti walked away from the hamlet with a long piece of string and a pot of lime. The children gathered round and watched Jeergunti stretch the string tight, lower it to the ground and then go over it with a handful of lime. Soon there were two straight parallel white lines, about eight steps apart, stretching across the fields.

three-day festival of the village deity. There was much singing, dancing and merry-making on the green. The neatly white-washed houses of the people were deserted. The Colony's inhabitants were a happy-go-lucky people who seemed to have no care in the world. Many of them had no lands at all and worked as labourers in the neighbouring villages. To look at them one could not have guessed that. They lived well and spent whatever they had on food, drink, festivals, and on staging dramas.

Kenchappa tried in vain to catch Pillaiya's eye but he was engrossed in beating the drum. A procession of boisterous people carried a colourful *puje kunita** hoisted on their shoulders. Then the procession broke up and the feast began. The pungent smell of mutton fried with spices wafted across as the lid of a giant vessel was lifted up. As one song ended, another was taken up to the beat of clapping hands and exuberant cries.

Kenchappa wondered whether this was the right time to address them. They were all gathered, they were happy. Perhaps he could carry them forward on the same wave of enthusiasm. He waited quietly until the feasting was done and then took Pillaiya aside to ask him if he could get them to listen. "Certainly," Pillaiya answered casually.

"Hey, Vardayya ! Kempayya ! Come here all of you," he called out.

"You come here yourself, Pillaiya ! See how beautifully Chikkavanu sings the part of Draupadi."

It was useless. Kenchappa went towards the singers. Someone was energetically playing a harmonium with foot pedals. Half the keys were broken and the rest

*Deity in a ritual dance.

Old Doddiah tries to amuse a hungry child during the famine

The women came and decorated a spot between the lines with a *rangoli*.* Another group brought a conical Muniswara made of flour and placed it reverently on the *rangoli*. Old Doddiah brought a pickaxe and laid it down alongside the cone. Some young girls came with wild flowers and mango leaves. The *guddali*† and the deity were worshipped with *kumkum, haldi* and flowers. The women sang a chorus in praise of Muniswara. Kenchappa broke a coconut on the ground and offered bananas and camphor. Then he handed Doddiah back the pickaxe. The old man dug his heels into the earth, raised the axe high above his head, and brought it down with great force, upturning the earth. There was a shout of joy from the people. The children began to clamour for the *kallepuri*‡. And so, on an auspicious Monday, work started on the road of Kenchappa's dreams.

No more sermons and haggling, not for a while at least. Kenchappa was tired of words. Let the people of the neighbouring villages see for themselves what Bannigiri could do.

Navaratri§ was at hand, and the *ragi* in Kenchappa's fields stood ready. Another month, and it would be harvest time. Kenchappa studied the white lines where they touched his field. He took a sickle and began to cut down the tall ripe heads with vigorous strokes. The people watched in silence.

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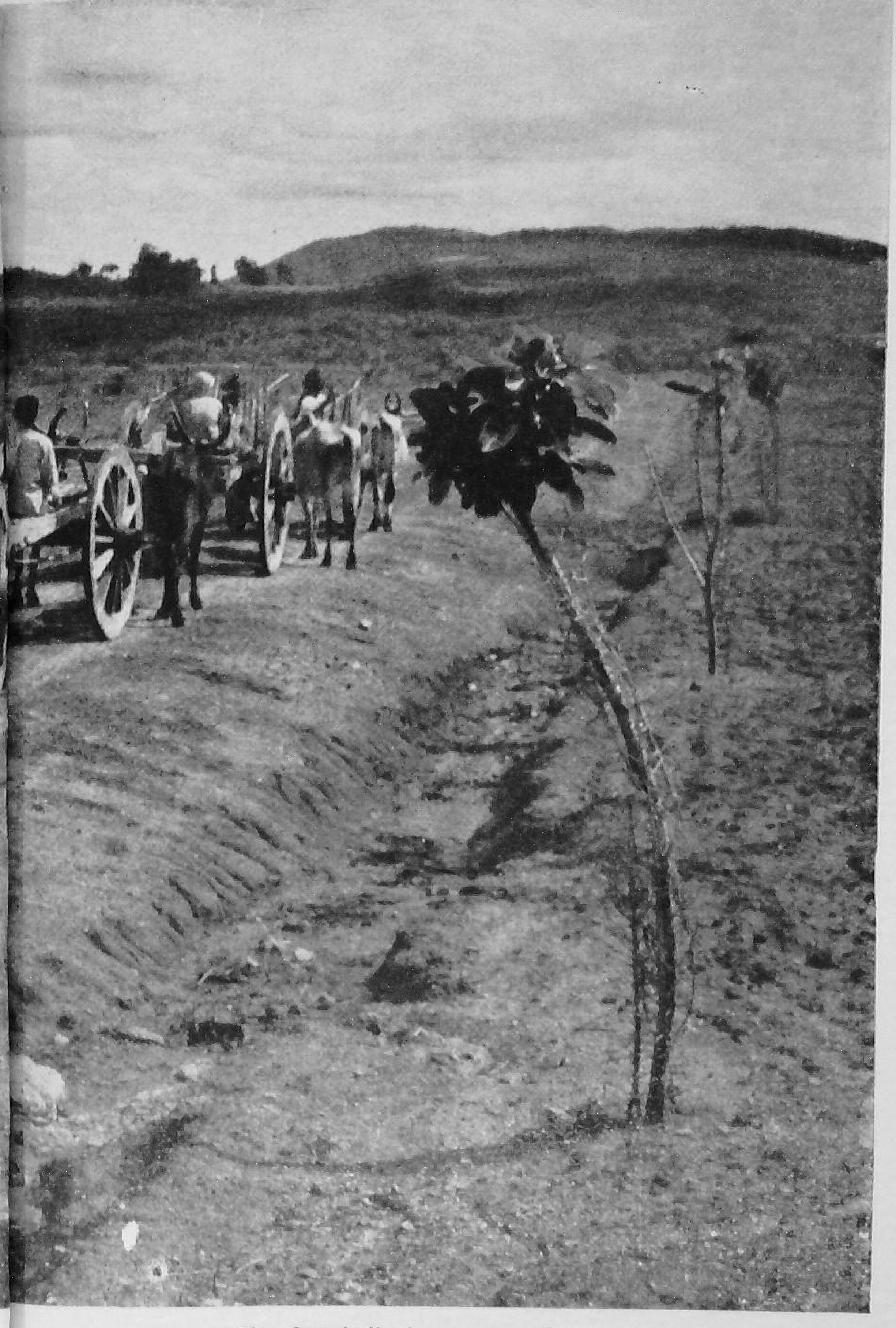
* Alpana; decorative designs drawn on the ground with powdered soapstone.

† Local variety of shovel

‡ Puffed rice and parched gram distributed after some ceremonies

§ Nine-day festival culminating in Dussehra



The first bullock carts on the new road to Bannigiri

Six or seven people took up pickaxes and began to dig mechanically where Doddiah's axe had made a deep gash in the earth, in much the same spirit as they would join in a dance. By the afternoon the number had swelled to a hundred. They were working for a common, good purpose. It did not occur to anyone to ask more questions.

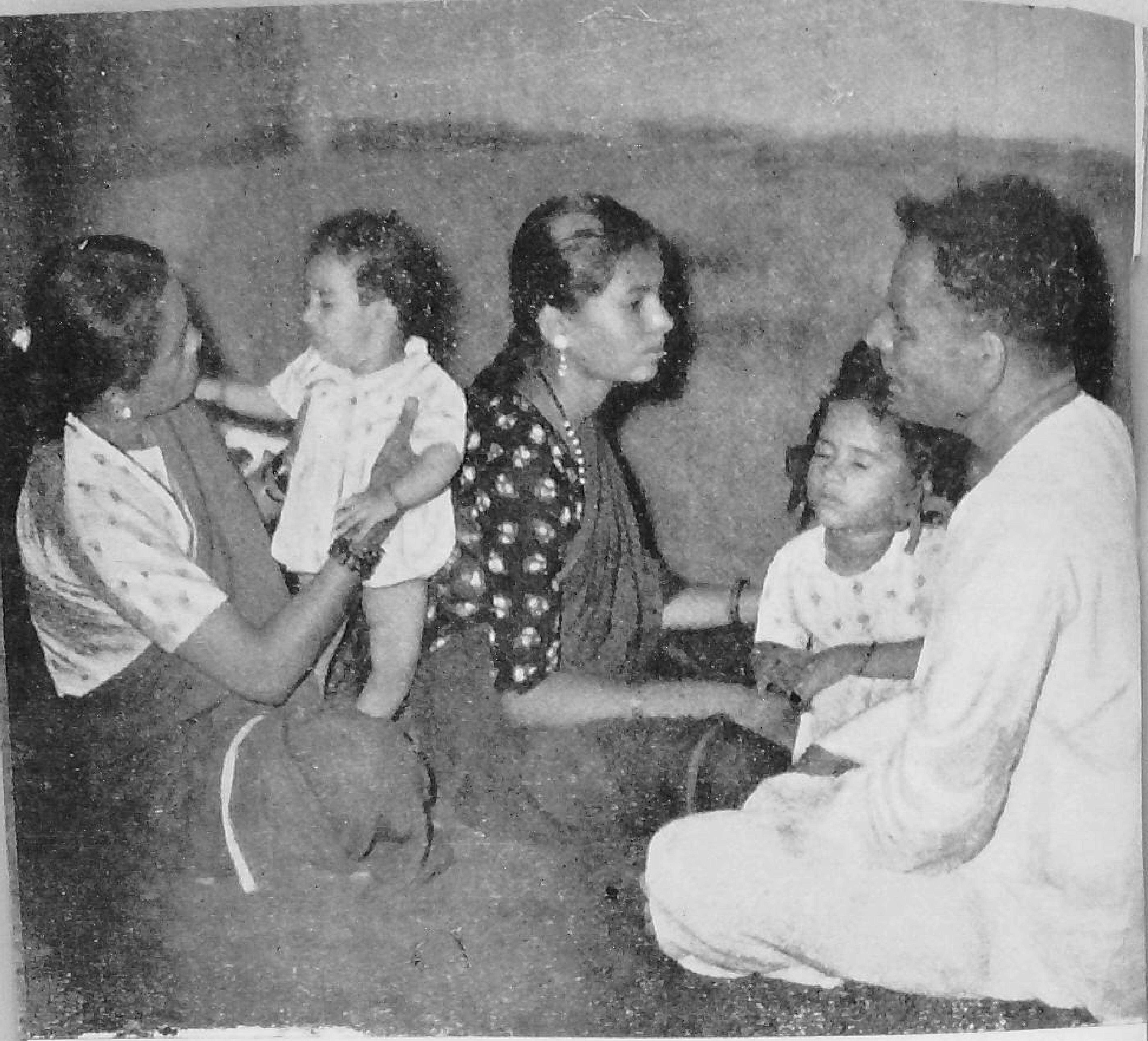
"This is soft soil, quite easy to dig," Kenchappa said. "If each adult in the village will undertake to dig only sixteen yards, we shall have a mile-long road before we know it."

They worked until sundown that day. The fields were cleared and the under-growth cut away. They sang as they dug up the cleared stretch. They lifted large bits of rock and flung them out of the way. The women collected earth in baskets from the sides of the road and emptied it on to the middle. They even sang as they worked, overcome by an exhilaration they had not experienced ever before. When they laid down their pick-axes and shovels for the day, Kenchappa's fields were divided by a neat little stretch of *kuccha* road twelve feet wide, gently sloping at the sides, so that the rain water could drain away.

The people came back the next day and together they evened up the stretch they had worked on the previous day, with shovels and with their bare feet.

Kenchappa and Jeergunti had in the meantime extended the parallel white lines even further to the north and the south. Kenchappa marked out a fixed portion as each family's share of work.

"Don't neglect your fields or your cattle," he said, "Or your homes", he added, smiling at the women who always separated from the men and stood apart.



In Kenchappa's home

Kenchappa lay down across the new road, too exhausted to get up and go home. The workers glanced at him affectionately. "He is a good man, but a man possessed," one remarked as he picked up his shovel, slung it over his back, and started homewards.

The harvesting was done, and the fields cleared up and ploughed. Then the rains came, beating down with great fury. When they departed, they took with them a little part of Kenchappa's precious road. Down by the backwaters towards the Adi Karnataka Colony, there was a bog of slush where the road had been.

THE HELPING HAND

The rain had dwindled to a cool drizzle. Kenchappa stood with old Doddiah at the brink of the muddy pool that had been a part of the road, staring down.

"Who is that man in the clean white shirt coming towards us ? I don't think he belongs to these parts," Doddiah said screwing up his eyes.

Kenchappa turned to look.

"That is Jorappa. I have seen him many times in Byramangala talking to the villagers, bringing them seeds, *vilayati** poultry and ploughs of a new kind. He is employed by the Government. There is some kind of programme to help the people. Of course the programme is not for us. Someone told me that the Kutagal

* General term for anything that is foreign, especially British or European

And so they came back again and again. Each day they found the white lines longer and longer. Now all the families of Bannigiri knew well the stretch of road allotted to them. They gradually began to think of it as their own, and even take pride in it.

People came and went as it suited them. Some came early in the morning before they went to the fields, some came late in the evening when they had finished all their chores. And then it happened that some people who were expected in the evening did not come in the evening. They did not come the next morning either, or on the following day. More and more began to drop out, and there was just half a mile more to go !

It was harvest time. Kenchappa made fresh appeals. "Let us do all we can before the heavy rains come. Let us not give up now that there is so little left to do." But all he could muster together now was half the number that had started the road. Only those came who had fathers or uncles or brothers to look after the harvesting work.

"Let us each work as two men," Kenchappa urged. Seeing that he himself worked like a fiend, many joined him. For five whole nights they worked in the moonlight. At midnight, food came in baskets from Devirammanni's kitchen to refresh the workers, food enough for a hundred people which only fifty devoured.

Kenchappa bought forty packets of *bidis* and passed them round for five nights. He laughed and joked with the diggers and patted them on the back. And so it happened that when the morning star appeared on the sixth day, Bannigiri had a new road a mile and half long. It is true that the road did not come from any place in particular or lead anywhere in particular.

Anyhow, we have more urgent things to think about. Doddiah, we must get the tree-planting work started without delay." And Kenchappa began to move towards the village, almost like a man in a trance.

Jorappa was impressed. Falling into step beside Kenchappa, he said amiably, "With so much interest and enthusiasm, my work here should be easy."

"What is your work here ?"

"The Government programme you have heard about now extends to Bannigiri and the neighbouring villages also. My work here is to find out your difficulties, help you and serve you in any way I can."

"Since when ?"

"Let us say from this moment ?"

Kenchappa stopped walking and looked at Jorappa. Then they both laughed.

When Kenchappa once again gathered the people around him and spoke to them of the damage to the road, he felt their indifference rise against his words.

"What is he up to now !" they wondered.

"The harvest is done, the fields ploughed and sown. Surely you can afford to give a little time so that what you yourselves have achieved is not destroyed ?"

Some grumbled and said, "How do we know the trees we plant will not be uprooted, too ?"

Others relented and said that they would do it for Kenchappa's sake.

"But it is not for Kenchappa's sake, you must understand," put in Jorappa vehemently. "It is for your own sake and nobody else's".

It took them hours to come round. At last the first volunteers set out for Allalasandra and Managanahalli

and Bidadi *hoblis*† are quite out of the picture. I wonder what this fellow is doing here."

Jorappa came up to them and greeted them, first the old man and then Kenchappa in a more familiar way.

"What wonderful work you have done, Kenchappa !" he went on. "People are talking about it even in Ramanagaram. It's a good road. I had to walk with my bicycle only a little way from Maravegowdanadoddi. Then I rode to Bannigiri."

"The Maravegowdanadoddi stretch has still to be done. In fact we are going there today to start the work. The people have already agreed to do it."

"By the way Kenchappa, I noticed as I came up near the bent mango tree that part of the road has been ploughed up. For all I know, it may already have been sown."

"Is that so ? We must put an end to that sort of thing," Kenchappa said greatly perturbed.

"But how long can you keep vigil over the entire stretch ?" Doddiah asked.

"It is quite simple," Jorappa interposed quickly. Why not plant trees on either side to mark off the boundary of the road ? It will also prevent the road from being washed away, and you will not have to see such sights as this." He pointed to the bog of slush.

Kenchappa and Doddiah were silent and thoughtful.

"Have you heard that the Government will give bridges and culverts where the earthwork has been done by the people themselves ?" Jorappa asked.

"The former Patel tried for years to get help from the Government. It does not seem to be meant for us.

† Group of villages forming a sub-division of a taluq.

THE VOICE OF THE UNWILLING

Venkatappa of Maravegowdanadoddi was as good as his word. Within a few hours he had got the eighty people of the village together. Soon they were cleaning the under-growth, levering huge rocks out of position with crowbars and digging the western edge of Venkatappa's fields which was to form a part of the road. Kenchappa felt quite at home and knew exactly what instructions to give and how to allot the work. Even when he took off his *dhoti* and started wielding the pickaxe himself, each worker knew he was a leader.

Then it happened that they came up to Kempamma's land. The shovel had just touched the earth when she came waving her fists at the sky and spitting fire. "Stop at once! Don't you dare touch a hair-breadth of my land," she screamed, thrusting her body forward menacingly. Her bent waist was lined with loose folds of skin. Her earlobes hung down almost to the base of her neck but now there were no silver ornaments to fill the gaping holes with.

"Please be calm, Kempamma. Don't you see that I have given some of my land for the road. So has Doddiah here. It is for the good of us all." Venkatappa said.

This only provoked a fresh outburst.

"It's all very well for you to give away your lands like a king, Venkatappa. What is two acres for you? Not even a flea-bite! But why should I give up three-

four miles away. The next day they were back with heavy headloads of *basari** branches. Kenchappa persuaded some to go with him to the big banyan of his childhood, which he had begun to own many years ago. They cut down the branches and carried them back. Some dug deep holes all along the roadside. Some brought sand in gunny bags all the way from Byramangala. A layer was dropped into the bottom of each pit. They then carefully planted the cuttings. When the young red leaves began to sprout they covered the saplings with palm fronds to protect them from the scorching sun. The tree-planting work was in full swing.

When Kenchappa was sure it would go forward on its own momentum, he left for Maravegowdanadoddi with old Doddiah. At the same time, Jorappa left with Jeergunti for Hanchipura and Chikkakuntanahalli. It would be easier and quicker if they divided the work between them "I shall try the Adi Karnataka Colony when I finish with Maravegowdanadoddi," Kenchappa told Jorappa, wishing him farewell and good luck.

* A common tree in Mysore.

A new kind of wooden plough that digs much deeper and is much easier to wield

fourths of an acre? That is almost half of all I have." She struck her hand against her stomach. "Once I lost everything I had! Don't think that just because I am a poor old widow with no one to look after me you can do that to me again. I will never give up an inch of my land! You can go ahead with your grand plans without me!" Her voice rose shrilly. Kempamma subsided after her brief spell of hysteria but still stood between the road and her land, her feet planted wide apart.

"Come, come, Kempamma," said old Doddiah soothingly. "No one can force you to do anything you don't wish to. And don't say there is no one to look after you. What about your sons?"

"Don't talk to me of my sons!" stormed Kempamma. "Bah! These young people have no love for the land. They would rather rot in some hole in the city—Shiva alone knows what they do—than do an honest bit of work under the open sky. I don't know what has come over the world!"

Kenchappa did not know whether his mission had failed or succeeded. He moved over to Kempamma and addressed her again, softly, humbly, pleadingly; he spoke of how the people would bless her for her good deed; he painted a bright picture of the future of Maravegowdanadoddi. Kempamma stood sour and unmoved, her face averted. When he spoke of the gratitude the people would have for her, she merely said, "Huh, as though I can eat gratitude!"

She still sounded vehement, but something told Kenchappa that it was only her voice which was aggressive and that deep down in her heart something had surrendered. But it would take time for it to come to her lips.

An adult literacy class in Bannigiri

Kenchappa asked the people to leave Kempamma's land alone and to take the road forward from the point where her land ended and Doddiah's began. This is how Kempamma came to have a field with a road leading away from it on both sides.

When Kenchappa left Maravegowdanadoddi, there was a road running from Byramangala right up to Bannigiri and a little beyond, unbroken but for Kempamma's bit. There was no time to waste over haggling. Soon the rains would be over and the land would become hard.

By this time, the people of the Adi Karnataka Colony had heard that there actually was a road. So Kenchappa did not meet with much resistance there. All feasts and festivals were over and the sowing done. Some people were eager to co-operate. They felt vaguely that they would be done out of something if they didn't. But there were others who much preferred to rehearse the Victory of the Five Pandavas to building a road.

"If you build a road, thousands of people can see your drama staged. You can have proper costumes from Mandya. There is a good *mestru* in Uragalli who can come and teach you new songs and new plays. You can even get handbills printed in Ramanagaram so that the people of the cities also get to know of your play." They heard him quietly.

"Just see what the people of Bannigiri have been able to achieve, on their own !" Kenchappa went on.

"We have heard that their work was all washed away by the rain ! What a waste of labour !" one of them mumbled, but without much conviction.

But somehow, when the clearing and digging began, they all came to work. The work went on more or less

Narayan Rao, the village level worker, brings good quality seeds to Bannigiri

Chikkananjaiya sat leaning against the wall, smoking. "It does my old eyes good to see you, son," he said quietly.

Kenchappa looked so sheepish at this affectionate reproach that Devirammanni melted.

"You know that I am not really angry," she said smiling and sitting down. Kenchappa looked at her as though it was for the first time. She had strands of gray where there had been glossy black, but the lithe girl of fifteen he had married had not faded entirely.

Then Chikkamma came with the food and set it before her father. "How she has grown!" he thought, helping himself.

"Kempamma and Boganna did not agree," Kenchappa said, between two mouthfuls.

"To what?" asked Devirammanni.

"To giving up a little land for the road."

"So it is the road again! You and your road!" Can't you think of anything else? Who is to see that Shivanna does his school work properly? Who is to teach him the hundred other things a boy should learn to do at this age? Chikkamma has come of age. Soon all the suitable boys will have been married off, and all because her father was too busy bothering about a road......"

But Kenchappa could not help bothering about it. How to bring round Kempamma and Boganna became his constant thought. He consulted Veersanje Gauda who had come from Bangalore to Byramangala for a few days. Veersanje Gauda assured him help. One day the two men walked to Maravegowdanadoddi, and to Kempamma's house. Veersanje Gauda had known Kempamma's husband for years, and as Patel he had known

smoothly. When they came up to the land owned by the prosperous Boganna of Byramangala, his tenant farmer implored them with folded hands not to touch his landlord's property without permission.

"He will ruin me," the wretched man whined. This episode took Kenchappa to Boganna's house in Byramangala.

"What you say is quite true," Boganna said smoothly, "but how can I let you take away my tenant's land ? It has already been sown and it would not be fair to deprive him of it. Who will compensate him ?"

"It doesn't add up to even one eighth of an acre," Kenchappa said. "I am sure he will have no objection to foregoing a bit of seed if you say yes."

"No, no, it wouldn't be right. Let this crop be over and then we will talk about it when the right time comes," Boganna said with the air of one who has hit upon a brilliant solution.

"When in heaven's name is the right time going to be !" Kenchappa said, flaring up.

That was a tactical mistake. There was no further talk, and Kenchappa came home to Bannigiri.

It occurred to him on the way back that all these months he had quite forgotten that he had a home, a wife, a grown-up daughter, and lands of his own to look after.

"What marvel is this ? You have actually come home to eat !" Devirammanni said in a strange voice. "I am so used to cooking for sixty road-builders at a time that I have forgotten how to cook for a husband."

"Don't be angry with me, Devirammanni. I've had a lot of trouble. . . ."

these retreats. They had stopped pinching him as they used to. He was convinced that such things were not obstacles but only temporary delays which the will of the people would finally overcome.

A few days later there was a renewed assault on Boganna's residence. A large group of farmers from Bannigiri followed Kenchappa and Veersanje Gauda to Byramangala. The former Patel tried his eloquence. Kenchappa, too, was outspoken. The farmers said, "when we who are poor could give away our land, why cannot you, who have so much ?" Boganna glanced about him like a trapped animal. Those hangers-on who had flattered and supported him against Kenchappa all of a sudden fell silent. Boganna thought the pressure would choke him, and he could hold out no longer. "Very well," he said in a small voice, forcing a pale smile. "If you are not willing to wait, I cannot do anything but agree." When finally Kenchappa got back to Bannigiri, Jorappa was waiting for him in his *jagali* to tell him that his mission in Hanchipura and Chikkakuntahalli had also been successful.

Kenchappa was satisfied. This was much more than what he had hoped for. But he had to wait six months for the rains to complete the work, although so many days had been spent in persuading the tough customers. That night he slept well.

When the rains came again, Jorappa went to work with a vengeance. He even slept at the work site night after night. At last all the gaps were linked up. All but the steep bit where the backwater of the Byramangala reservoir always collected, the part near Bannigiri that that had been washed away last year. But for that, any vehicle could go from Byramangala right up to Chikka-

when to make people laugh, when to frighten and when to cajole them. Half the village had gathered to watch the battle of words on Kempamma's field. Her shouts rent the sky and she brandished her arms in Veersanje Gauda's face. But now he folded his hands and flattered her until she was like a lump of soft clay in the potter's hands.

At last Kempamma said : "All right, take the land and be done with it, and don't pester me anymore." She had great regard for the former Patel.

"Don't think I let him browbeat me," she told the spectators. "I had always meant to give the land up, but why should I negotiate with a puppy like Kenchappa ? Did you see how at last the elderly Patel had to come to me himself and supplicate me with folded hands to give up my land ? You should all be grateful to me, all of you there who are just standing and enjoying this *tamasha* ! And mind you, it is I who will have to pay tax on the land which will form your road."

Still grumbling, Kempamma went into the house.

Within a month Bannigiri had a complete link with the main road.

Kenchappa went with Veersanje Gauda to Boganna of Byramangala. Boganna turned out to be a tough customer, determined to play an oily game of politics. He was difficult to handle because he would not put all his cards on the table. Nor was he the sort of man who would give up something for nothing. Some people also said that he had never forgiven Veersanje Gauda for giving the Patelship to Kenchappa.

The first combined assault failed, and Kenchappa returned to Bannigiri. He had become quite used to

very road you have built and see for himself what you have done and what you still need."

"Jorappa, let us go back and make arrangements to welcome him."

To be able to leave the office at Ramanagaram finally and start for home gave Kenchappa a feeling of relief.

A GARLAND ROUND HIS NECK

There had never been so much excitement in Bannigiri before. Men and women bustled about under the spreading banyan. The ground was swept and sprinkled with water. Garlands of *gulmohur* flowers and mango leaves were hung up over the entrance to the grove. Old men sat smoking, giving vague instructions from time to time.

"Better remove the stones from there, so that the guests don't stumble."

"That garland has snapped in the middle. Somebody had better attend to it."

The Block Development Officer from Ramanagaram, who they still called "the big officer" was already here to help them. It was he who had arranged to hold a seminar in Bannigiri to which all the people who mattered were invited.

"It seems as though *Yugadi* is here again," one woman remarked.

kuntanahalli. Jorappa persuaded Kenchappa to accompany him to Ramanagaram where they would ask the big officer to get a sanction for a bridge and a culvert.

"Nothing will ever come of this trip", Kenchappa said.

"Just you wait and see," Jorappa said, full of confidence.

The familiar sights of Ramanagaram brought back memories of his early youth. The little market where he had shopped for gunny bags, coconuts, and fuelwood was the same as it had always been. But this time it was another world which claimed Kenchappa. It was a world where one signed on paper after paper, waited endlessly on wooden benches, moved from officer to officer and heard big-sounding phrases which one only half understood. It was a fussy world but one that seemed important and powerful. Jorappa conducted Kenchappa through its mazes and mysteries. Kenchappa went through the ordeal much as a *sannyasi* might who performs penances to secure the unattainable. What Kenchappa wanted to secure was a bridge and a culvert.

It took Kenchappa a while to get used to the language of the big officer and to understand that he was not just a bossy fellow who liked to feel important but that he really meant to help.

"Let the engineer who takes up our bridge and culverts be a man who belongs to our own parts. Only if he loves this land as we do can he understand our needs," ventured Kenchappa.

The big officer smiled at his simplicity.

"Don't worry. You shall have your bridge. The Deputy Minister himself will ride to Bannigiri on the

the road for which we have toiled for over a year will remain useless for three months in the year. I congratulate the workers, whose voluntary labour, given ungrudgingly, has saved the Government something like twelve thousand rupees. With no engineers to help us, we have built a road eight miles long, and acquired for it nearly 40 acres of land without Government intervention........"

Veersanje Gauda's speech went on. Occasionally there was applause. All eyes were fixed on him. Kenchappa sat lost in the crowd, listening intently.

The Deputy Minister and the Deputy Commissioner allowed themselves to be led up to the backwaters where the bridge was needed and eyed the scene importantly. Then they returned to the banyan. There were discussions and speeches, after which there was a feast.

In the afternoon, there was another meeting at which a surprise awaited old Chikkananjaiya. The Minister, who rose to speak, got off the dais, went to Kenchappa, and to the amazement of the villagers, removed the garlands that had been placed around his neck and flung them round Kenchappa's. Dragging him to the dais, he narrated how he had heard, during the day, the whole story of the Bannigiri road. He told the villagers that it was workers like Kenchappa that the country needed most.

"My husband says it is just like a big wedding in the city," said another.

People gathered from all the surrounding villages. Something very important had happened to them, they felt. Everyone was dressed in their best clothes, looking spruce and a bit self-conscious. Veersanje Gauda was here too, beaming and benevolent as ever. A hundred ears were cocked to hear an unfamiliar sound. And then it came—the distant whirr of an engine. Presently a big black car appeared, bobbing up and down, raising clouds of dust, and making a lot of noise as the motor laboured up the *kuccha* road. It came to a stop under the *peepul* tree, and all the children rushed forward, hiding the mud-spattered monster from view. It was the first time that a motor tyre had touched the soil of Bannigiri.

The men of consequence stepped out and were instantly covered with garlands. Veersanje Gauda led them proudly to four rickety chairs, the result of a village-to-village hunt, that stood in a row under the banyan. The address of welcome was read out, and drinks of tender coconut offered to the honoured guests. There were many speeches. The people did not understand all the words but they were intoxicated with the welcome they had themselves extended. They felt that nothing they could do was good enough for these celebrities from the city. The guests were plied with tea, sweets and bananas and then Veersanje Gauda stood up to make a speech. "Brothers !" he said in a ringing voice, "I have tried for twenty years to move the Government to build a road here but without success. Now that we have built it on our own, I as member of the Block Development Council, appeal to you to give us the grant of a bridge. Without a proper bridge and culvert

would cost them twenty-two rupees if they went to buy it. But he could let them have it for only ten.

Some people did say, "What does this lad know about such things! We know better who have been farmers all our lives." But even so, all those who could afford to, bought the new plough. There was a cartload of them.

Narayan Rao has brought them new seeds and manure. The crops are much better than they have ever been. Most families have about twenty *pallas* of *ragi*. They have begun to grow crops that never grew in Bannigiri before—a little paddy, *jowar,* sugarcane, mulberry, and vegetables like tomatoes, brinjals and French beans.

Once a week, a jeep brings the doctor from Ramanagaram. Sickness is no longer a calamity from which there is no escape.

Kenchappa has gone back to the land. His voice is seldom heard. The B.D.O. asked him whether he would like to work with them in Ramanagaram.

"This land is enough for me," he said with a smile.

"I know you better than that, Kenchappa," the B.D.O. laughed. "In no time you will again be up to something or other. Tell me what do you have up your sleeve now ?"

"Nothing very much. But I have just been thinking how good it would be if we had a sheep-rearing society, and those *vilayati* hens and...........".

Kenchappa's list was long. The B.D.O. knew as he turned back that this was a list that would never come to an end.

ONLY THE BEGINNING

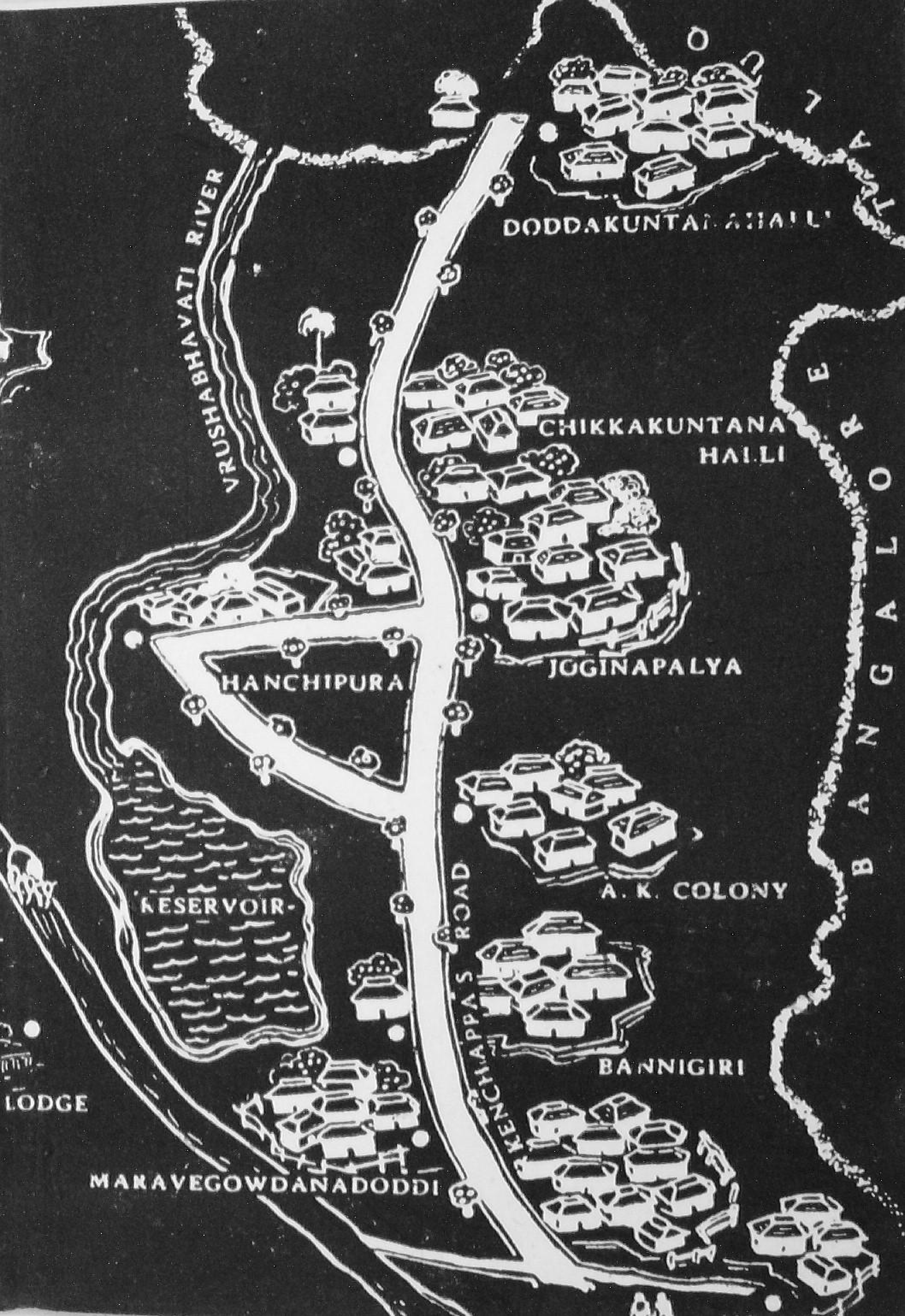
One cannot quite say that Bannigiri is not the same any longer. The old *peepul* tree is still there and children and chattering monkeys cluster round the tamarind grove. The fields still toss and wave the dark-brown *ragi* head in the wind. But there is a new air of alertness about the place and a new sound has been added to the still air. This is the steady creak of bullock carts plying to and fro.

There is a constant stream of them. Sometimes they are loaded and sometimes empty. They carry *ragi* and hay if it is harvest time, seed and manure if there is ploughing to be done. Occasionally there is a cartload of tomatoes, brinjals and greens.

The jeep is no longer a novelty. Officers from Ramanagaram come often and they are welcome in every *jagali*. Jorappa has gone to some other village in Magadi, but the people have not forgotten him.

One day the big officer came with a young stranger. "This is Narayan Rao," he said, "he will help you as Jorappa used to."

Narayan Rao had brought with him a new kind of plough made of wood and steel. He showed them how much easier it was to wield it than the heavy wooden ploughs they had been used to. Their ploughs dug only four inches while this one dug nine. Not only that. It upturned the earth automatically so that it held moisture much longer. Narayan Rao told them that such a plough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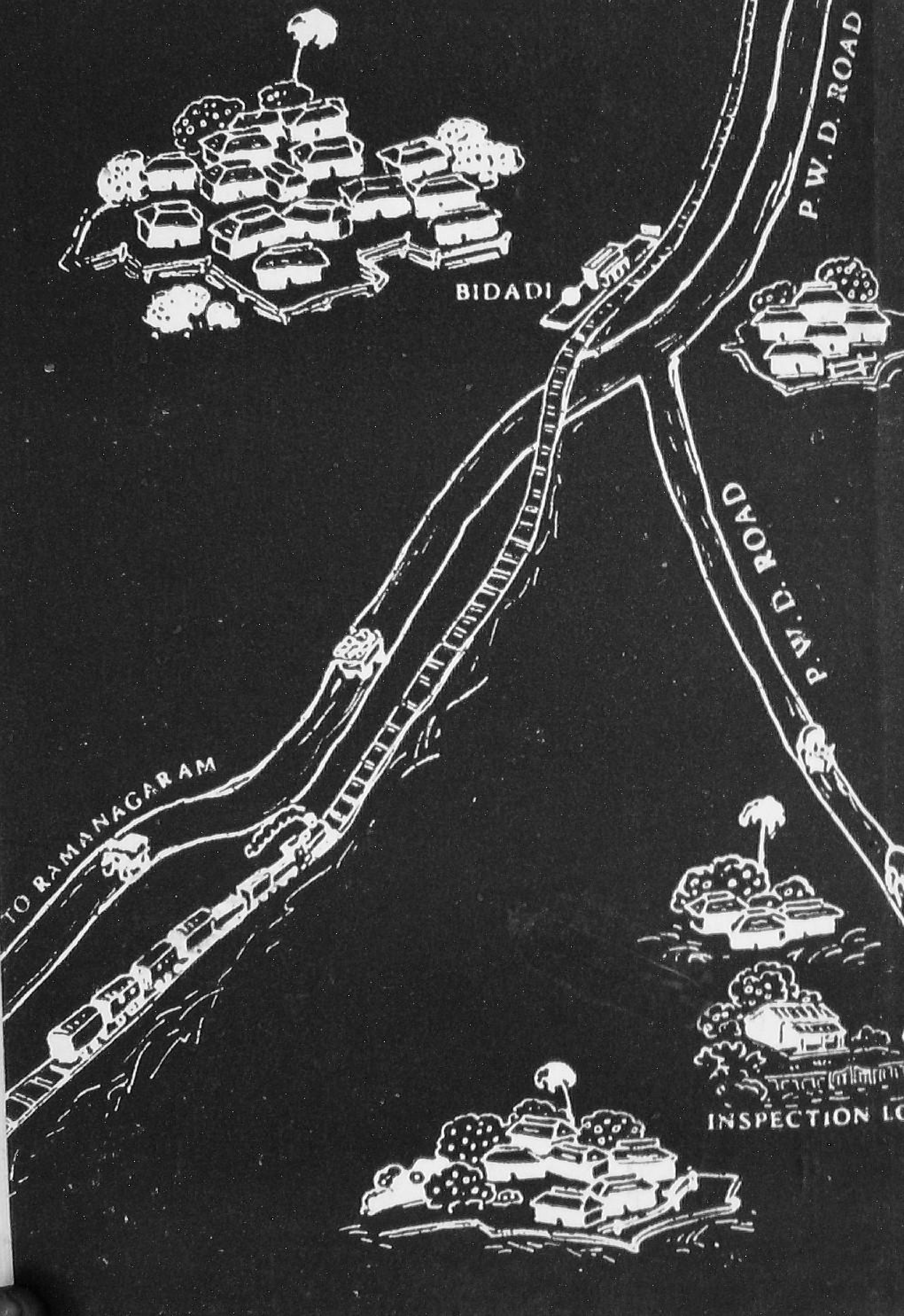

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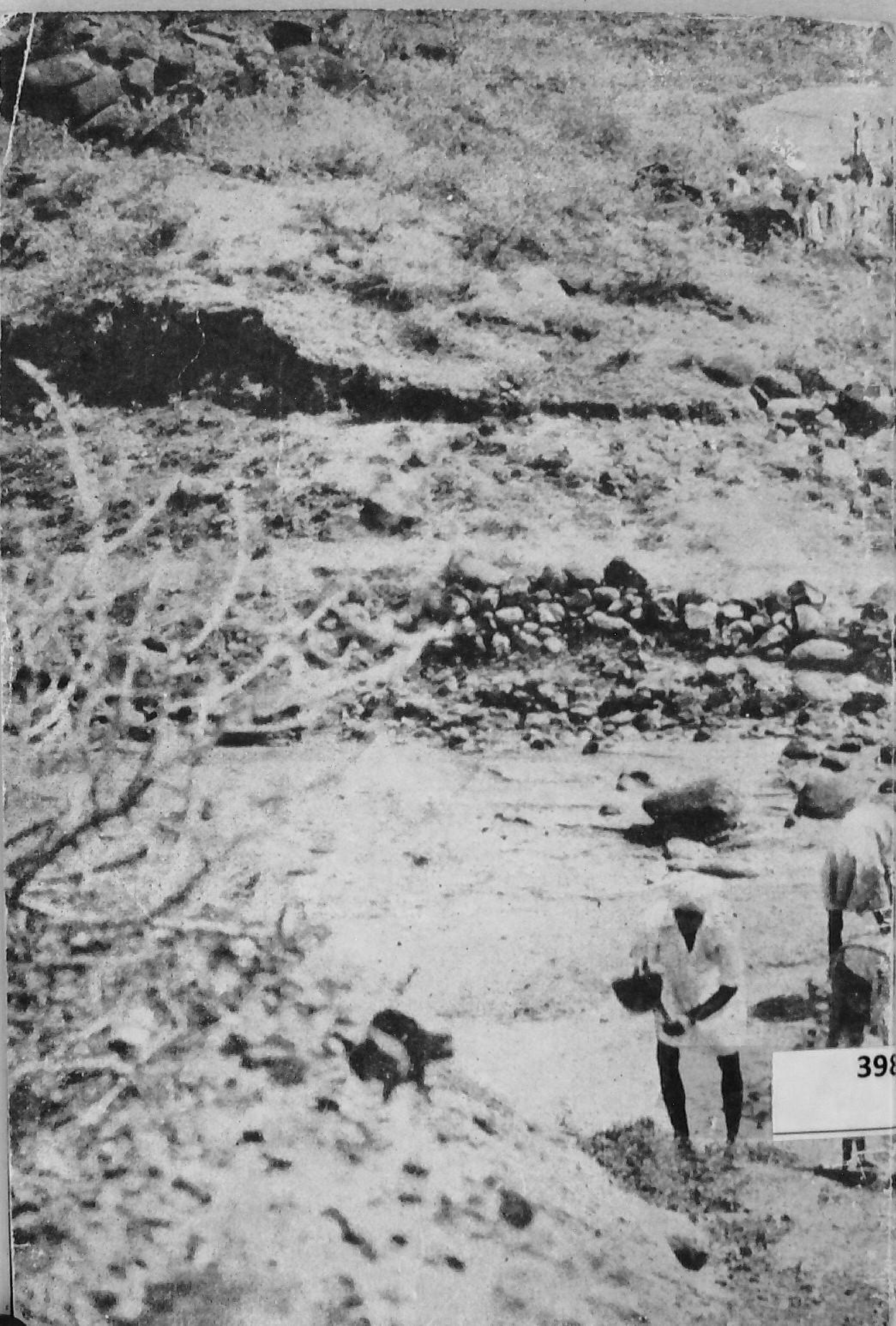
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